

Panhandle Health District

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Protecting Yourself and Others

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The first time I held my granddaughter a few hours after her birth, I knew I'd do anything in my power to ensure her health and happiness. Little did I know that I was endangering her already.

My immunizations weren't current. I wasn't protected from hepatitis A or B, tetanus, diphtheria or pertussis—whooping cough. Pertussis is airborne, spreads easily and is dangerous, even deadly, for children younger than 1. Why didn't I know about the vaccine?

"Most people think immunizations are for kids or travelers," said Randi Lustig, who directs Panhandle Health District's disease prevention program. "Adults need them too, or they can pass on illnesses that are preventable."

In my defense, the Tdap immunization that helps prevent tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis in adolescents and adults is fairly new on the scene. The national Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices agreed three years ago to recommend a single dose of Tdap for adults ages 19-64 to replace one booster dose of tetanus and diphtheria. Tetanus and diphtheria boosters are recommended every 10 years for adults.

The committee also recommended Tdap for adults in close contact with infants.

Infants are particularly vulnerable to whooping cough. It can cause seizures, pneumonia and brain malfunctions. Whooping cough is most contagious before coughing starts. An adult infected with pertussis can spread the bacteria without even knowing he or she is carrying it. The Tdap vaccine is the best protection.

"I recently investigated a case with a child under two months old," said Donna Marshall-Holden, PHD's adult immunizations program coordinator. "The baby was pretty sick and too young to have had his first immunization. Someone brought whooping cough into his home."

Unless adults travel, they tend to dismiss the need for immunizations after childhood. But protection is just as important for adults as it is for children. Immunizations reduce the spread of disease at any age, as long as they're current.

The spread of measles earlier this year shows how important a Measles, Mumps and Rubella (MMR) vaccine is for adults born after 1957. Measles were declared gone in the United States in 2000 thanks to the MMR immunization. Still, the rest of the world reports 20 million cases each year.

Last spring, 131 measles cases were reported in this country—the most since 1996. Several cases were in Moses Lake, Wash. Nearly all the cases were acquired outside the United States or linked to a case brought in from another country. Of the 131 people infected, 90 percent were not immunized.

People born before 1957 are considered immune because they most likely had measles as children. Everyone else, including people older than 50 who didn't have measles, needs one dose as an adult to protect themselves and others.

Immunizations against Hepatitis A and B are recommended to protect adults from food-borne and blood-borne diseases that can damage the liver. Hepatitis A is a virus that spreads through food and feces. It's been found in produce from other parts of the world.

People recover from Hepatitis A, but they don't need to experience the sickness or risk spreading the virus if they've had the vaccine.

The Hepatitis B vaccine protects people who come in contact with infected blood.

“If you’re the type to jump up and help at a car accident, make sure you’ve had the Hepatitis B vaccine,” Lustig said. “And carry latex gloves in your car.”

For adults who never had chicken pox and don’t want to experience the disfiguring illness, the varicella vaccine offers protection from the virus. Women who haven’t had chicken pox and plan to get pregnant should talk to their health care providers about the varicella vaccine.

Another fairly new vaccine on the scene protects people from Shingles, a painful skin rash caused by the same virus that causes chicken pox. The vaccine, Zostavax, is approved for the 60 and older age group only right now because that’s the sole group on which it’s been tested. It’s also the age group that suffers the most from shingles.

Shingles is the resurrection of chicken pox virus. A person may have had and recovered from chicken pox as a child. But the virus stays in the body. Usually it causes no problems, but occasionally it awakens and reasserts itself as shingles.

Medicare Part D covers Zostavax.

Other adult immunizations to remember are:

- Flu—get one every year to prevent catching and/or spreading the flu.
- HPV—for woman younger than 27 to protect against the virus that can cause cervical cancer.
- Travel vaccines—visit www.CDC.gov to find out what vaccines are needed in the area in which you plan to travel.

Immunizations for adults range in price from \$20 to \$180. All are available at Panhandle Health District. PHD doesn’t bill insurance. For an appointment, call 415-5270.